

# ON THE AIR

## A Short History of Broadcasting to the Bristol Area



JOHN PENNY

# THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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*On the Air* is the one hundred and second pamphlet in this series.

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ISSN 1362 7759

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The title 'On The Air' is taken from a gramophone record of that name (EMI Col.S 1094) by Carroll Gibbons and the Savoy Hotel Orpheans, with vocals by Dorothy Stedeford, released in 1932.

*Cover illustration:* The logo of Bristol's Radio West which existed only from 1981 until 1985 above an ident used by the BBC Television Service during the early 1950s

# ON THE AIR

## A Short History of Broadcasting to the Bristol Area

The history of radio and television broadcasting contains two parallel strands, the story of the engineering and scientific developments which have provided an ever improving means of delivery, and the steady progress made on the creative and political front which has enabled this comparatively new medium to adapt its programming styles and content to meet the needs of an ever-changing society. However, in spite of the fact that it is the programmes and personalities involved in broadcasting which have made the greatest impression on audiences during its first 75 or so years, any account has to include a certain amount of technical detail, although this has been kept to the minimum required to explain the basic engineering techniques employed during the period before the digital revolution began in 1998.

Towards the end of the last decade of the nineteenth century, wireless telegraphy started to become a practical proposition and although for a hundred years Morse Code was to be successfully used for point-to-point communication throughout the world, if radio was to become a mass medium then telephony, rather than telegraphy, would have to be employed. However, as 'spark' transmitters predominated in the period before World War One, and these were unsuitable for sending the spoken word, it was not until after the conflict, when thermionic transmitting valves had been perfected, that radio broadcasting became a practical proposition.

Although several methods exist for impressing a sound signal on to radio waves, amplitude modulation (AM) was the first to be discovered and in January 1920, in order to test its long distance propagation characteristics, the Marconi Company set up an experimental transmitter at their works at Chelmsford, from which was soon being broadcast half-hour programmes of speech and music. However, it was a special *Daily Mail* sponsored song recital by the opera singer Dame Nellie Melba on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1920, heard as far away as America, which caught people's imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. This was really the turning point in the public's response to radio and in spite of opposition from the military, in May 1922 a second experimental station, the famous 2LO in

London, was authorised to conduct regular broadcasts directly from Marconi House in the Strand.

Nevertheless, Marconi's did not have a complete monopoly of British broadcasting at that time, for also in 1922 Metropolitan-Vickers were granted permission to open a station in Manchester and Western Electric one in Birmingham, so in order that radio broadcasting should not develop in the commercial 'free for all' manner that was taking place in the United States, the Post Office thrashed out a scheme of co-operation amongst the equipment suppliers. This resulted in the establishment of the British Broadcasting Company Limited in October 1922, an organisation with monopoly status for public radio transmission in Britain, but one in which only the bona fide manufacturers were permitted to hold shares. Broadcasts commenced in November, and the following month John Reith was appointed General Manager, this rather dour Scotsman being convinced that the company's future lay as an independent broadcaster able to educate, inform and entertain the whole nation, free from political interference and commercial pressure. To bring radio broadcasting to as many people as possible in the shortest time the BBC set about constructing a network of eight stations to work in the medium wave band (570 to 187 metres), each of which was to put out its own locally produced programmes. However, for the Bristol area this was to prove a most unsatisfactory arrangement as it had been decided that both sides of the Severn Estuary were to share a transmitter, and this was to be located at Cardiff. Revenue to run the service was to come from a 10% royalty on the sale of receiving sets and equipment plus half of the 10 shilling licence fee for receivers, also introduced in November 1922, and of which more than a million were issued during the first two weeks of the month!

Locally, Bristol's involvement with radio telephony had begun on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1922 when the Marconi Company carried out a test transmission between the city and London. On this occasion Sir William Noble at Marconi House took the opportunity of speaking directly to the Mayor of Bristol, who recalled how as a young man he had helped Bell explain the telephone to his fellow citizens. The demonstration was a great success and in three London halls 830 people, each with headphones, heard the speeches, while shortly after, on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1923, the new local BBC station became operational giving many people in Bristol their first taste of radio broadcasting. The opening announcement was made a little before 5 o'clock that afternoon, the new electronic era being heralded in for many with the quaint introduction 'Hullo CQ, Hullo all, Hullo everybody, this is 5WA speaking, the Cardiff station of the British Broadcasting Company'. Children's stories

were then broadcast before finally at 6.50 pm Lord Gainford, Chairman of the BBC, introduced the Lord Mayors of London, Bristol and Cardiff, the latter officially opening the station ten minutes later.

Transmitting on 395 metres, 5WA was the fifth BBC station to take to the air and provided, within about a 25 mile radius, a signal strong enough to operate a simple crystal-set driving a single pair of headphones, the way in which most people 'listened-in' at home, although those wealthy enough to have a set equipped with valves and a loudspeaker could expect reasonable reception for the whole family up to 75 miles away. In addition to the local stations, at Daventry the BBC also decided to erect a powerful transmitter to operate in the long wave band (2020 to 1080 metres) and this, with the call sign 5XX, was to bring a London compiled National Programme to some 94% of the population. The new station commenced regular broadcasting on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1925, and during the General Strike of May the following year played a large part in radio coming of age as a medium when, with few newspapers available, the BBC provided the country with five news bulletins a day.

In just over four years the BBC, a body formed with no higher purpose than to promote the products of the equipment manufacturers, had become a national institution and in order that it might receive the necessary funding and continue as a public service the Post Master General announced that in January 1927 it would become the British Broadcasting Corporation, a public body deriving its authority from a Royal Charter, free from either commercial or political domination. With the BBC's future assured, during 1930, in order to improve reception throughout the country, the Corporation began putting into operation its 'Regional Scheme' which resulted in many of the existing local stations being replaced by pairs of powerful co-sited medium wave transmitters, one of which would radiate a localised Regional Programme and the other the National Programme. This reorganisation made its initial impression in the Bristol area on May 28<sup>th</sup> 1933, when the first transmitter went on the air from Washford, near Minehead, providing improved reception for many listeners in South Wales and the West.

In addition, the National Programme was also put out by the long wave station at Daventry until, on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1934, it was finally replaced by a new high-power transmitter at Droitwich, which until fairly recently operated with a high degree of accuracy on the famous wavelength of 1500 metres.

Surprisingly, despite the Depression, during the late 1920s and early 1930s the British radio industry was growing strongly, while the development of 'all-mains' radios, dispensing with the need to regularly

charge heavy 'Low Tension' accumulators and to buy expensive 'High Tension' dry batteries, also coincided with a rapid increase in the proportion of homes with mains electricity. As a result, by 1930 there were five million radio sets in Britain, many of them mains powered, but locally these were still confined to the better-off as, even by 1931, of the 113,000 homes in the Bristol area, a little less than half were connected to the electricity supply.

Bristol itself had emerged as a very small programme centre in 1931 when a staff of three began producing material that could be added to the output from Cardiff. To begin with they operated from offices and a small studio over the Midland Bank in Queen's Road, but soon transferred to re-modeled and extended premises at 23 Whiteladies Road. These were opened on September 18<sup>th</sup> 1934, which also happened to be the second day of the Bristol Radio Exhibition, and are still occupied by the BBC. Here had been constructed a large Orchestral Studio, as well as Dramatic, Talks, and Effects Studios, while the Control Room was connected directly to Birmingham, Cardiff, Plymouth and the Washford transmitter by way of broadcast quality Post Office telephone lines.

Councillor F.C. Lukes, the Lord Mayor of Bristol, carried out the opening ceremony during which he made a special point of mentioning the 'Welsh Problem', which was a vexed issue for the vast majority of listeners in the area. 'The use of the Welsh language', he said, 'has in many cases seriously affected the pleasure of our listening. It has been a matter of constant representation through the West Regional Station that the general population covering the West of England are outside the scope of purely Welsh broadcasting, and as a consequence the regional broadcasting has often been entirely neglected, even when it has had English items on the programme.' The speeches over, the first programme to be transmitted from the new complex was a concert featuring Eva Turner, William Parsons the Bristol baritone, and the Bristol Symphony Orchestra, which went out at 9.15 that morning on the regional transmitter.

Even with Bristol having been provided with new studio facilities, locally the regional approach remained firmly based on the principle of linking Wales with the West, and this relationship continued to be extremely edgy due to the language and cultural differences. Nevertheless, strong local representation finally prevailed and a few years later it was decided that the West should have its own dedicated service, this being provided by an additional medium wave transmitter at Washford which went into service on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1937. However, in order to improve coverage in the West Region, which then ran from Brighton





*Above: The original part of the BBC's Broadcasting House, Whiteladies Road, opened in September 1934*

*Below: Phase II opened in January 1990*



down to the Channel Islands and up to Gloucester a specially sited local transmitter at Clevedon went into service at 3 pm on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1939 and was soon appearing in German Airforce documents as target GB 49 33!

Although by the early 1930s dance bands were attracting vast audiences to their various radio shows, on Sundays the BBC's output was strictly controlled by the authoritarian John Reith who completely banned light music, and only permitted such things as serious talks and church services be transmitted. This gave potential commercial radio stations the slot they needed, and although such undertakings were not permitted in Britain, in a number of nearby countries no such regulations applied. The first person to take advantage of this was Captain Leonard Plugge, a classic English eccentric, whose International Broadcasting Company started buying air time on foreign stations and subsequently selling it as advertising space to British firms. However, in 1931 he expanded his operation by founding Radio Normandy which broadcast from a medium wave transmitter at Fécamp on the northern coast of France and provided the clearest signal of all. Southern England was its main reception area where, particularly on Sundays, a receptive audience were regaled mostly by American-style dance music. The success of the station also encouraged others to enter the potentially lucrative field of commercial radio broadcasting including a consortium, which in spite of heavy international pressure against them, constructed a powerful long wave transmitter in Luxembourg. The station began its broadcasts in English on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1933 and although the quality of reception in Britain was variable Radio Luxembourg could be picked up nearly everywhere, its unashamedly popularist programmes quickly becoming very popular.

Early on the morning of September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939 German troops swept into Poland and later that day the BBC's National and Regional radio programmes were suspended for the duration of the forthcoming war, to be replaced by a single non-regionalised Home Service broadcast throughout the country. To ensure that German bomber crews would be unable to make use the stations for navigational purposes the programme was initially carried on two wavelengths only, and all the transmitters synchronised. Thereafter, when RAF Fighter Command ordered a station off the air due to the presence of nearby hostile aircraft other transmitters took over, so that locally the listener was conscious of nothing more than a slight decrease in volume. The first warning that the change was about to take place was given in the 6 o'clock news, and for the next two hours the announcer, Robert MacDermot, played records and every few minutes urged listeners to tune to either 391.1 or 449.1 metres prior to the launch of the new service at 8.15 pm.



Over on the Continent immediately war broke out Radio Luxembourg suspended its English service, but after a short pause the International Broadcasting Company resumed its daytime transmissions from Fécamp, principally for the benefit of the British Expeditionary Force in France. However, the BBC's fear of commercial interests, plus a desire to entertain the troops itself, lead the Corporation to successfully campaign for its closure, and in response, on January 7<sup>th</sup> 1940, it started its own experimental 'light entertainment' channel, which on February 18<sup>th</sup> was expanded to a full service, known as the Forces Programme, broadcast on two wavelengths in the medium wave band. This soon became very popular, not just with the men and women in uniform, but amongst the civilian population in general and would, after the war, become a permanent institution, albeit under a different title. After a shaky start, during the Second World War the BBC went on to successfully deliver programmes aimed at boosting the morale of the population and keeping industry running, this being accomplished with an output of 'sing along' music and comedy, both suitable for distribution over factory tannoy. However, of all the programmes transmitted the most popular, whatever its content, proved to be the 9 pm news bulletin read by announcers who, from June 1940 until May 1945, gave out their names. Soon 'listening-in' at this time had become a national institution ensuring that news readers such as Alvar Liddell and Stuart Hibberd became better known by the public than some cabinet ministers!

Britain, of course, was also a fundamental target of Germany's English language radio programmes, and to begin with broadcasts were made over the domestic medium wave stations at Hamburg and Cologne, as well as from transmitters at the Zeesen complex south of Berlin, although these operated in the notoriously unreliable and difficult to use short wave band (100 to 10 metres) which, in spite of being extensively employed for international broadcasting, relatively few radio sets in this country were equipped to receive. However, reception in Britain was greatly improved on November 26<sup>th</sup> 1939 when Cologne was replaced by 'Bremen I', a new 100 kilowatt medium wave transmitter which Gemona AG, a joint venture between Sir Oswald Mosely's Air Time Ltd and the Reichspost, had started constructing the previous year at Osterloog on the German Frisian coast, from where the fascist leader had hoped to broadcast his propaganda back across the North Sea! Although a number of individuals presented the English language programmes it was the infamous William Joyce, better known as 'Lord Haw-Haw', who, after making his broadcasting debut on September 6<sup>th</sup> 1939, went on to become not only the first international celebrity radio propagandist, but also the most resented of all the Axis broadcasters.

The evening transmissions invariably started with Joyce's sinister and hectoring voice making the opening announcement: 'Germany calling, Germany calling, here are the Reichsender Hamburg, station Bremen and station DXB on the 31 meter band'. At first his programmes seemed both harmless and amusing to his audience and he was soon attracting as many as 70% of all British listeners through his nightly *Views on the News*, which was purposely put out immediately after the BBC's own 9 pm news bulletin. However, on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940, a few days after the start of regular air-raids on Britain, a change of attitude in programming was introduced 'to spread alarm and fear among the British people', but this only angered his audience and as the content became harsher in most areas the popularity of 'Jairmany Calling', as Joyce pronounced it, rapidly declined. Nevertheless, in Bristol in the spring of 1941 Mass Observation noted that there was still a notably keen following for German broadcasts, which locals were overheard saying gave the same information as the BBC, but two days sooner! At the same time the local Regional Information Office reported deep disillusion in the city with BBC news bulletins, as these were regarded as giving insufficient credit to Bristol's sufferings at the hands of the Luftwaffe's bombers

As soon as war had been declared the BBC's staff were dispersed out of London to locations then considered relatively safe from air-raids, the Variety Department, School Broadcasting, Children's Programmes, Religion and the Symphony Orchestra, some 700 people in all, being sent to Bristol where they remained until 1941 when the blitz on the city forced a further move. The Symphony Orchestra was accommodated in a hall in the Co-operative building on the Tramways Centre and, in a masterpiece of improvisation, the Variety Department dispersed to various church halls in Clifton. This was all accomplished very quickly and on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1939, Geoffrey Edwards, the *News Chronicle* radio correspondent, wrote that Variety Director John Watt has just shown him over two of the parish halls which he hoped soon to convert into what he called 'The BBC's Fun Factory'. Shortly after, on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1940, *The Star* was able to inform its readers that there were six studios in Broadcasting House at Bristol, but added that Studio 8 was the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral, Studios 9, 10 and 11 were at Clifton Parish Hall, and 12 and 13 in All Saints Parish Hall, which was sometimes required for choir practice, while Studio 14 was attached to St. Paul's Church and also doubled as a gas-mask distributing centre!

Nevertheless, in spite of all the problems, from these and other studios at Redland Park, in College Road, and in the Chapter House, came such classic programmes as *Band Wagon*, with Richard Murdoch and Arthur Askey and *Monday Night at Eight*, with the Three Chimes,

presented by Harry S. Pepper and Ronald Waldman. Particularly well received was *ITMA* (It's That Man Again), which was soon attracting audiences of 16 million, the billing from Clifton Parish Hall on Tuesday November 7<sup>th</sup> 1939 reading: 'with Tommy Handley, Maurice Denham, Vera Lennox, Jack Train, Dolly Elsie, Vernon Harris, the Cavendish Three, Sam Costa and The Dance Orchestra conducted by Billy Ternent.' Other productions from Bristol involved such personalities as Jack Hylton, Billy Cotton and Jack Warner, while programmes like *Lucky Dip*, *Palace of Varieties*, *The Pig and Whistle*, *Henry Hall's Guest Night*, *Billy Cotton*, *Tavern in the Town*, *Movie Melodies*, *Strange to Relate*, *Scrapbook*, *Songs from the Shows*, *The White Coons*, *Paul Temple*, and *Garrison Theatre* soon became popular with listeners all over the country.

In addition, the tunnel of the disused Clifton Rocks railway housed a complete emergency radio station and Frank Gillard, the Head of Programmes for West Region, later recalled how the BBC became established there. 'In the first place a tunnel of the defunct Bristol to Avonmouth railway was chosen. To test its possibilities, Sir Adrian Boult conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra of nearly a hundred instrumentalists in this subterranean passage. The result was by no means displeasing - but, alas, before the BBC could move in, Bristol had been heavily raided, and this tunnel had fortuitously become the improvised shelter of hundreds of blitzed citizens. In the face of this set-back, the search had to be renewed. Eventually it was decided to make use of the shaft of another disused railway, the Rocks Railway; and this was rented for twenty-one years at a peppercorn rental of a shilling a year. The lease was signed, and the detailed planning began. A meeting was held in the BBC office at Bristol; a committee of four, the discussion lasted through the night. In the small hours the Regional Director retired to his bed (which was in one corner of the office) and the other three finished their business to the tune of his gentle snoring.

'A few days later, the Civil Engineering Department produced an expert on tunnel construction. Under his direction, rock-drilling machines, concrete mixers, bricklayers, carpenters and plumbers went into action. The dripping roof of the tunnel was given a waterproof lining. Electric light was brought in. The framework of four large chambers took shape, one above the other, along the dark slope of the tunnel. Three smaller chambers were laid out near ground level. It took three months to complete this structural work. Then came the radio engineers to install the equipment. The topmost chamber, about halfway up the shaft, was to house radio transmitters - a local transmitter to give a programme service to the city of Bristol, and communication transmitters

which would maintain contact with other BBC centres. The chamber below the transmitter room became the studio - with an upright piano (to save space), gramophone turntables, and enough equipment to make it suitable for music or small-scale drama or feature programmes. On the next level, below the studio, came the recording room, fitted with recording and play-back equipment, and with enough recorded programmes stored away in its lockers to maintain a radio service for weeks.

‘The fourth large chamber was the control room, measuring fifteen feet by twelve feet. Into this space BBC engineers packed apparatus which it had never before been thought possible to assemble in an area twice the size. Something like eighty pairs of Post Office telephone lines terminated in this room, linking the fortress with the outside world and the BBC’s network of transmitters scattered throughout the United Kingdom, and so routed that if a bomb severed some there would always be a good chance of others remaining intact and available. A special button was fixed to the wall of the control room, which, when touched, triggered the big diesel motors, installed in one of the lower rooms, to generate an independent power supply when the mains failed.

‘Another of the smaller rooms was fitted up as a canteen. Sufficient food to last three months was stored therein. Huge tanks contained emergency water supplies. Others held enough fuel to run the engines for many weeks on end. A special ventilation plant was put in, with intake and extractor fans and an ozoneator. The tunnel was made immune even from gas attack. It was indeed a fortress - a fortress which could hold out on its resources for months if necessary.

‘Whenever the sirens sounded in Bristol, the essential programme staff on duty were rushed down to the tunnel studio. An armoured car was available for the journey if danger was imminent. Alert or no alert, the tunnel control room was manned by technical staff day and night from its inception until the end of the war. Every day, hundreds of broadcasts in English and in scores of foreign languages passed through those grey panels on their way from the studios in London and other parts of Britain to the transmitters in the West of England which would radiate them to listeners at home and overseas. A superb piece of planning, but fortunately it never had to be brought into full operation.’

Before the end of the war the BBC had decided that when peace returned there should be three nationally available radio programmes in Britain, all forming part of a complete cultural spectrum. These were to be the re-instated regionalised Home Service, the broad middle strand of the Corporation’s output, the Light Programme, a direct continuation of the popular Forces Programme, and a new Third Programme, to offer serious literature, drama and music together with intelligent discussion.

The first part of the scheme came into operation on July 29<sup>th</sup> 1945, when the West Home Service returned and the Light Programme began on long wave, but in order to provide additional frequencies for the Third Programme, early in 1946 it was announced that it would be necessary to merge the West Region with the Midlands. Once again the West Country rose in revolt, the Lord Mayor of Bristol sending a telegram to the Lord President of the Council, while other civic leaders, the press and public also proclaimed their opposition. Consequently, and with the final decision being taken at Cabinet level, the West Region was reprieved, but these problems conspired to delay the start of the Third Programme which was not launched until September 29<sup>th</sup> 1946.

Although the BBC had been able to introduce a completely new radio channel soon after hostilities had ended, the post war shortage of resources affected their plans to extend the Television Service beyond the London area where it had started back in November 1936. Consequently, it was not until August 1948 that the government backed the Television Advisory Committee in authorising the building of enough new regional transmitters to give nation-wide coverage, although still in monochrome and using the pre-war 405 line standard. Unlike radio broadcasting, at that time still confined to frequencies below 30 MHz (10 metres), television was transmitted in the specially allocated very high frequency (VHF) Band I (41 to 68 MHz) which was large enough to accommodate channels 1 to 5.

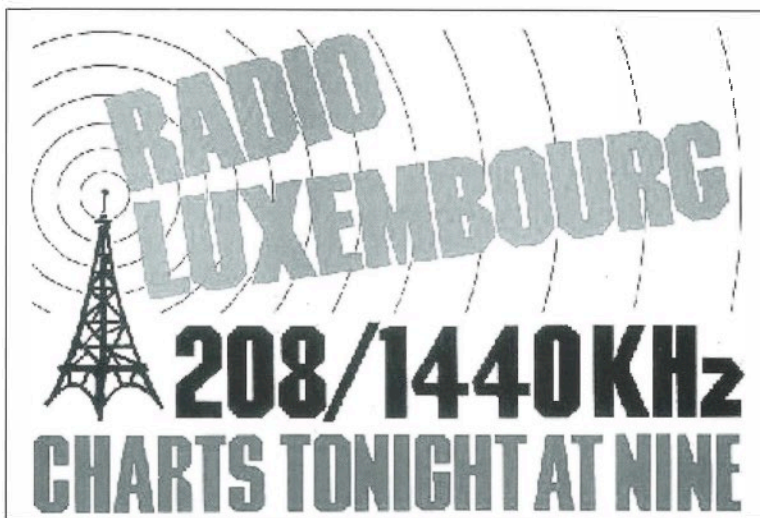
Bolstered by the introduction of a combined radio and television licence, which cost £2, the BBC Television Service duly started to expand and on Saturday December 17<sup>th</sup> 1949 a powerful new station at Sutton Coldfield began operating on channel 4. This extended coverage to the Midlands and although Bristol was not even within its secondary service area, transmissions were received with varying results throughout the city during that first weekend. The opening ceremony was performed by Wilfred Paling, the Post Master General, and excellent pictures of this, displaying little or no interference, were reported in such places as Southmead and Bedminster Down, higher districts away from the main thoroughfares. However, one of the largest audiences assembled at the Hawthorns Hotel, in Clifton, where Messrs. A.F. Merriott & Co. had installed seven television sets for the 200 guests to watch, but here the viewers enjoyment was spoilt by steady interference from the ignition systems of passing motor vehicles. This was to prove an enduring problem in most parts of Bristol, and even with the help of an elaborate aerial array the weak and fluctuating signal from Sutton Coldfield was only capable of providing a viewable picture on about three nights of the week!

Meanwhile, the French owners of Radio Luxembourg had announced on September 12<sup>th</sup> 1946 that commercial programmes targeted at Britain would resume at the end of the year. Lured initially by request shows and the first chart countdown on British radio, its audience soon returned and as listening figures overtook the pre-war levels, commercial sponsors queued for air time. Nevertheless, in 1951 the parent company decided it could make more money by using the long wave transmitter for the expanding French service and as a result programmes in English were switched to 208 metres medium wave, with broadcasts being confined to evenings only. However, in spite of background whistles and a fading signal 'Luxy' went on to become one of the world's best known and fondly remembered commercial radio stations.

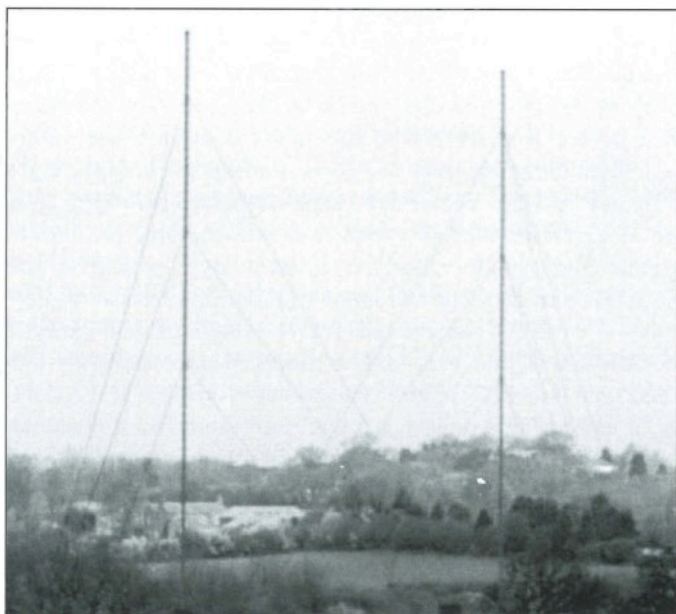
At about this time local entrepreneur Horace Batchelor started promoting his 'Infra Draw' football pools system on Radio Luxembourg and Geoffrey Everett, the station's UK Manager later recalled: 'I went down to Bristol to see him and he said, "Geoffrey, I want to do the commercials myself". Now if you'd met Horace and heard him you'd have thought he was the last man in the world, poor old chap, heavy Bristol accent and he used to take his teeth out before he started, that didn't help, and I said, "Oh! Horace are you sure this is the right thing to do?" He said, "no complaint with what you're doing, but I want to do them". It was an ego trip, he did it very badly and I almost felt I ought not to let it be broadcast. You won't believe it, but he doubled the replies'. Indeed, such was the success of his campaign that at one time he was receiving 5000 letters a day and he even named his luxury Salford home 'Infra Grange', although today it is better known as the Long Reach House Hotel. Nevertheless, Everett did make an important contribution for it was he who always ended the adverts with the immortal words, 'Horace Batchelor, Infra-Draw method, Keynsham, K.E.Y.N.S.H.A.M, Keynsham, Bristol', thereby ensuring that over the years the little town's fame spread throughout the country!

During the early 1950s, with new transmitters being opened at regular intervals, the BBC Television Service reached the North of England in October 1951 and the Lowlands of Scotland in March the following year. South Wales and the Bristol area were the next to be served and although on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1952 the Wenvoe station, near Cardiff, went on the air on channel 5 using an aerial mast some 750 feet high and modified reserve medium wave transmitters, its service area was further increased on December 20<sup>th</sup> when the dedicated 100 kilowatt transmitter finally became operational. The station which had cost £250,000 to construct was now broadcasting to an area containing 4.5 million people, and by late 1952 it was estimated that about one family in every 25 in Bristol had acquired a television receiver.





*Radio Luxembourg closed its English Service on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1992 as in September 1989 its owners had helped launch Atlantic 252, an Irish long wave station giving 70% UK coverage*



*Mangotsfield (ST 672780), a typical medium wave transmitter. This station broadcasts BBC Radio Bristol and Classic Gold 1260*

The first day's transmissions, which lasted for only five hours and twenty minutes, opened at 5 pm with children's programmes, but just prior to this Sylvia Peters announced that: 'For the first time we take you direct to Wales', after which viewers were treated to Welsh singers and dancers, while to represent the West of England, music was played by an Army band from Winchester! A special programme from the grounds of the transmitter also went out between 7.45 and 8.10 that evening, the opening ceremony being performed by Earl De La Warre, the Post Master General, this being covered by two cameras, one for close ups and one for long shots. Finally, at 8.55 pm, came the first local feature, *Serenade*, a programme of music from the people of the West Country.

At first, all programmes were piped from London as local studio facilities were not immediately available, ensuring that the only locally originated material that could be produced were outside broadcasts, and even these were not possible until an OB unit to be shared between Wales and the West arrived towards the end of the year. Consequently, it was an adaptation of Hardy's *Tess of the Durbervilles*, performed at Bristol's Theatre Royal as part of *Armchair Theatre* series, that became the first television programme to be broadcast live from the West of England. Produced by Owen Reed, who worked for West Region radio, the actual televising was handled by the outside broadcast unit from Cardiff assisted by a few specialists from London, while the head of radio sound effects arrived on a motorcycle wearing a long leather coat and carrying all his bits and pieces in the side car. The sets were designed by Pat Robertson who had never done any television work before, and although the play was to be transmitted in black and white he did try putting some colour in to see if it affected the tones. However, in spite of a general lack of experience with the new medium after a young Peter Harris finally raised the curtain everything worked well, and as soon as the play had finished many of those involved moved up Park Street to join the BBC's celebratory party! The use of such venues as the Theatre Royal was, however, only a stop-gap measure as in 1954 the BBC acquired the old Empire Theatre of Varieties in Bristol's Old Market Street, and this it used as a television studio until demolished in the early 1960s to make way for the city's inner ring road.

Locally, the journalistic drive to publish the news was behind the development of BBC West Region Television, and when enough transmitters had been opened across the country to allow a national television news service to be set up, reporters based in Bristol began filming important stories as they happened in their area. Gradually local input expanded and Saturday November 17<sup>th</sup> 1956 saw the first appearance of the weekly ten minute *Sport in the West* feature, while on

September 30<sup>th</sup> 1957, *Points West* began as part of a five minute slot of regional news, but as the single transmitter at Wenvoe had to be shared between Wales and the West, only 2½ minutes was available for reports from Bristol. The West Region's television news bulletin first went on the air with a group of newscasters led by Hugh Shirreff, the Region's Senior Announcer, whose voice was already familiar to many listeners in the area, and at the time the *Radio Times* wrote that 'the team includes one woman - probably the first ever to read the news in the BBC's Television Service. She is a young actress, Armine Sandford, who has appeared regularly in sound and television drama broadcasts. Then there is John Tanton, the BBC News Department's Staff Reporter, for Devon and Cornwall. To complete the team, Tom Salmon, who introduces the television edition of *Sport in the West*, will present Regional Television News when his other commitments permit'.

With the public having become used to the clarity of the sound which accompanied the very high frequency television transmissions it was necessary for the BBC to bring the quality of radio broadcasting up to a similar standard. This was accomplished by utilising the specially allocated VHF Band II (87.5 to 108 MHz) where the available space also made it possible to employ frequency modulation (FM), a technique developed in America during the late 1930s and which had proved to be less susceptible than AM to interference such as that caused by thunderstorms and electrical apparatus. As a result, in May 1955, the first station opened to serve the London area, and although locally the West Region Home Service and the Light Programme both became available from Wenvoe on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1956, a temporary transmitter to carry the Third Programme was opened at Bristol on October 28<sup>th</sup> 1957, this remaining in use until a permanent installation at Wenvoe took over on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1959.

Until the mid-1950s advocates of commercial television in this country had many vociferous opponents, among them Labour politicians who considered that its introduction would reduce the quality of British television. Consequently, it was not until the Conservatives returned to power that steps were taken which led to the Television Act of July 1954, as a result of which the Independent Television Authority (ITA) was inaugurated. This body, under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark, was to be responsible for supervising the individual television companies, whose franchises covered different parts of the country, and they very soon rejected the American sponsorship system in favour of the advertisers simply buying air time during programme breaks.

Independent Television made its first appearance in London and the South East in September 1955, the new service being broadcast in the

previously unused VHF Band III (174 to 216 MHz) which was capable of accommodating channels 6 to 13, albeit with smaller service areas than the five already in use by the BBC in the lower frequency Band I. Commercial television spread across Britain in much the same way as the BBC's service had a few years earlier, and in February 1956 a transmitter opened to serve the Midlands, followed by one in the North of England in May and a third in Central Scotland in August 1957. Likewise, for the same technical and financial reasons that had guided the BBC, any ITV station serving South East Wales would, for the foreseeable future, also have to cover Bristol and adjoining parts of the West Country.

Although several groups started out with the intention of applying for a franchise to run commercial television in the area, ultimately only one major consortium emerged, the London based Television Wales and the West (TWW) headed by Lord Derby. The main associates were Jack Hylton, who was already packaging programmes for Associated Rediffusion, and Sir William Carr, owner of the *News of the World*, while a small stake was held by the Imperial Tobacco Company, based in Bristol, and the Liverpool Post and Echo group. A number of local people were also signed up to the board and the ITA had no difficulty ruling in favour of TWW against the other applicants, all of which were existing television companies, the contract being awarded in September 1956. Ten locations were subsequently surveyed for the new 55 kilowatt transmitter, the final choice being on St. Hilary Down, near Cardiff, but this ran into objections from the local airport, worried about dangers to air navigation from 750 feet of mast. However, these were dismissed after a public enquiry and planning permission, albeit subject to some conditions, was finally granted on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1957. Nevertheless, the whole process caused a four month delay and although it had been hoped to commence scheduled transmissions on December 17<sup>th</sup> 1957, further technical problems with the aerials forced a final postponement until January 14<sup>th</sup> 1958 when the station at last commenced broadcasting on channel 10.

The first day's programmes lasted some 7½ hours, of which 1½ hours originated from the Pontcanna Studios in Cardiff. It all started with *Production One* at 4.45 pm in which Mark Chapman-Walker, TWW's Managing Director, and Bryan Michie, the Programmes Manager, discussed the new programmes then, following some items for children, at 6.40 pm came *The Beginning of TWW* in which Lord Derby made one of the speeches. At 8 o'clock the quiz *The £1000 Word* was put out, and just prior to the first link being made to Bristol the compere Roy Ward Dickson announced that: 'TWW likes to think it was making an electronic bridge

between Wales and the West', while as he spoke a night picture of an illuminated Clifton Suspension Bridge was shown. One of the contestants on the show was Bert Tann, manager of Bristol Rovers FC, and he became the first Bristolian to appear on local commercial television when the outside broadcast began from the Grand Hotel. This type of programme was a foretaste of things to come for in contrast to the licence fee funded BBC, Independent Television was more 'downmarket' in its approach showing such things as quiz games and popular light entertainment shows in order to attract viewers to the new service.

The plan worked and after three months there were over 300,000 homes regularly watching TWW, each day's programmes normally being preceded by a Test Card accompanied by the distinctive anthem 'The South Wales & West Television March' which had been specially composed for the company by Eric Coates. This new enterprise went from strength to strength with TWW's viewers having risen to around 673,000 by the end of 1960 so, in order to allow an equal West Country input, on October 25<sup>th</sup> of that year new £250,000 studios at Bristol were officially opened at Bath Road, Brislington. The ceremony was carried out by Alderman A. Hughes Jenkins J.P., the Lord Mayor of Bristol who, within moments of unveiling the commemorative plaque alongside the front doorway, was facing the cameras in the large main studio which could seat up to 300 people. Here he was interviewed by Bristol born pianist Joseph Cooper, the piece being broadcast the following day in the *Here Today* magazine programme.

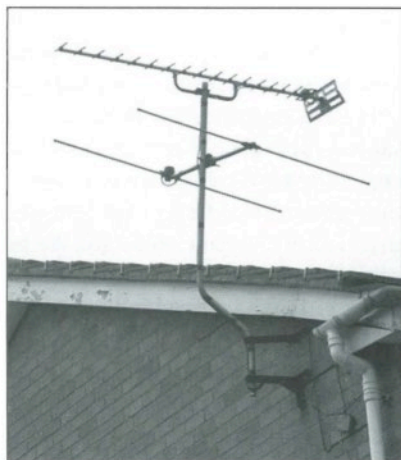
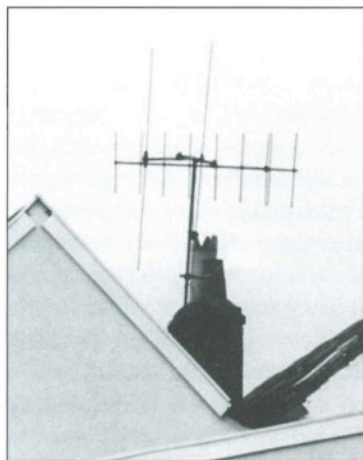
During the opening, Lord Derby took the opportunity of saying that: 'We have shown everyone quite clearly that the West is just as important to us as is Wales. We believe we have built a studio which not only this city, but the West of England, will be really proud of. We hope that in time you will come to look upon it as your studio'. The completion of this facility meant that TWW became the only British television company simultaneously operating major studios from two focal points in a region, and although the first large scale production from the Bristol main studio was *Big Night*, broadcast on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1960, probably the best known programme made there in the early years was the nationally networked pop music show *Discs A Go Go* introduced by Kent Walton, a presenter who went on to become a household name as a wrestling commentator!

The first step towards the establishment of completely separate television services for Wales and the West Country was taken on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1964, when the BBC opened a second transmitter at Wenvoe which, by providing a dedicated service for South Wales on channel 13, allowed the formation of BBC West and an extension of the *Points West* regional television





*HTV's Television Centre, Bath Road, Brislington, opened by TWW in October 1960 and extended in December 1986*



*Left: 405 line TV relics. A BBC 'H' and ITV yagi still look towards Wenvoe and St. Hilary nearly 20 years after services ceased.*

*Right: A UHF TV yagi aligned on Mendip above a VHF radio 'H' pointing at Wenvoe*



news on channel 5 to twenty minutes. This prompted the *Radio Times* to tell viewers: 'Now its reporters and cameramen will be able to do justice to their wide parish spread across five counties from Swindon to Exmoor and from the Forest of Dean almost down to the Dorset Coast'. Although over the years presenters have included John Craven of *Country File* fame, Andrew Harvey who went on to work for ITN, Vivian Creegor, later employed by Sky News, and the long serving Chris Vacher who first appeared in the programme back in 1983, *Points West* was, in 1991, replaced by *News West*, only to be reintroduced due to public demand on May 22nd 2000!

Also in 1964, in move which surprised nobody, TWW, which had always been closely associated with the financially insecure adjacent contractor Wales West and North, were approached by the ITA and persuaded to take over their ailing Teledu Cymru operation in a deal which, when it went through on January 26<sup>th</sup> 1965, made them the first ITV company to take over another. As part of the agreement, in order to enable TWW to compete on a level playing field with the BBC in their area, the ITA allocated them an additional transmitter in South Wales to extend Teledu Cymru to the whole of the principality, thereby freeing channel 10 for a 'General Service' of English language only programmes. Consequently, simultaneous broadcasting of the two services began on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1965 when Teledu Cymru was launched on channel 7 from St. Hilary.

Meanwhile, in 1960 the Postmaster General had appointed a committee under Sir Harry Pilkington to consider the future of broadcasting, and one of the most pressing problems to be addressed was the country's huge and unique commitment to its dated 405 line system in which the high visibility of the scanning lines had already set a limit to picture size. The committee's report was published in June 1962, followed by a White Paper to enable its recommendations to be implemented, the most important of which were that the BBC should provide the next additional television network. However, it was to be transmitted in Bands IV and V (470 to 855 MHz), at the lower end of the ultra high frequency (UHF) spectrum within which had been allocated channels 21 to 68, and was to use 625 line pictures accompanied by FM sound, a combination that was already in widespread use on mainland Europe. It was also decided that the two existing VHF networks employing 405 lines with AM sound should be duplicated on the new system as soon as possible as a prelude to being phased out altogether between 1982 and the early hours of January 6<sup>th</sup> 1985, when the last transmitter of all, Sutton Coldfield, was finally switched off. April 20<sup>th</sup> 1964 saw the start of this planned upgrade and although on that day BBC2 opened in the London area, South Wales and the Bristol region were unable

to receive the new offering until September 12<sup>th</sup>, when a powerful new transmitter operating on channel 51 was opened at Wenvoe. Finally, in December 1967 full colour programming was introduced on BBC2, the first such service to be provided by any broadcaster in Europe.

Although TWW's application to renew its television franchise in 1967 proposed some structural changes to the company, it basically relied on their record to date and leadership from a management team which still resided in London. By contrast, the rival consortium led by Lord Harlech contained two dozen or more prominent local people, and as it promised the development and encouragement of artistic, cultural, and educational activities, and was much more impressive at the interview, Harlech Television was awarded the contract. Not surprisingly, when on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1967 Lord Derby was informed that his company's application had been rejected he was furious, and although the ITA had placed the condition that 40% of the non-voting shares in Harlech should be available to TWW if they wished, Derby declined and instead went on to sell them the Cardiff and Bristol studios, along with the stocks of programme material and unused film rights, and even the last five months of the TWW franchise!.

Consequently, the company continued to operate as the local commercial television provider only until the night of March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1968, their transmissions ending at 10.35 pm with a special production called *All Good Things* featuring Bernard Braden, Morecombe & Wise, Tessie O'Shea, Ivor Emmanuel, Manfred Mann, Stan Stennett and Clifford Evans, followed by *Come to an End*, which contained a poetry reading and the final closedown by John Betjeman. This piece, which had been recorded in a deserted London theatre, drew to its conclusion a little before 12.15 am, when Betjeman simply said: 'This company had a warm, friendly, inspiring personality. I am very sorry to see it go', and after adding 'it's like an old friend', he walked towards a brightly lit EXIT sign, the last picture to be seen before the screen went blank and TWW disappeared into history.

An interesting anomaly then occurred, for as the company had sold the remaining months of their franchise period to Harlech, and the latter were not ready to begin broadcasting, the ITA was forced to intervene and set up temporary services for Wales and the West. As a result, the 'General Service' on channel 10 became known as the Independent Television Service South Wales and the West and the former Teledu Cymru operation on channel 7, the Independent Television Service Wales. In order to carry out this interim operation former TWW employees were engaged, while Harlech worked quickly to bring their launch date forward, broadcasting officially starting on May 20th 1968.

However, instead of it being a night to remember, the evening on which the new company put out their first programmes threatened at one

time to become a nightmare to forget. Although *Report*, the opening local news magazine, went out on time at 6.05 pm, it proved a near disaster and for minutes on end it looked as if some practical joker had been let loose in the studio. As Peter Tomlinson, making his television debut as a linkman in succession to Guy Thomas, tried to introduce a visit to the Bristol and Cardiff studios by Lord Ayleston, Chairman of the ITA, a bizarre series of pictures and numerals flickered on the screen during what was supposed to have been the programme's high spot, while an interview with the unfortunate gentleman became replaced by a report on a bus dispute in Abergavenny! Likewise, *Harlech Opening Night*, the variety spectacular specially recorded beforehand in Bristol, also failed to escape its share of gremlins when it was screened between 9 and 10 pm that evening. Nevertheless, in spite of these unfortunate teething troubles the new franchisee quickly established itself as an efficient broadcaster, and to ensure that a fresh image was created the company's programmes were preceded each day by a jaunty new up-beat march entitled 'Young Kingdom', which Harlech had commissioned from Jack Trombey.

The late 1960s also saw the pattern of the BBC's sound broadcasting radically transformed, for on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1967 the Light, Home and Third Programmes were renamed respectively Radio 2, 3 and 4, and a new service, Radio 1, was introduced to offer young people a diet of pop music as a direct response to the demand created by illegal off-shore pirate stations which between 1964 and 1967, when they were banned, had drawn huge teenage audiences. BBC local radio, albeit 'experimentally', also arrived in 1967 with the opening in November of Radio Leicester, the brainchild of Frank Gillard the then Director of Sound Broadcasting. The impetus for local broadcasting had in fact come from Bristol, where in his previous position as Controller of BBC West Region, Gillard had formed what became known as a 'local radio mafia', a group which met throughout the fifties and early sixties and even set up 'dummy stations' to make tapes in an attempt persuade the Pilkington Committee that there was a strong case for establishing local radio stations.

July 1969 saw the publication of the BBC's report *Broadcasting in the Seventies*, in which was contained plans for a new pattern of generic radio broadcasting. As a result, it was decided that Radio 1 was to remain an all pop network and Radio 2 become a music and entertainment channel. Radio 3 concentrated on serious music and the arts, while Radio 4 would go on to specialise in news, current affairs and the spoken word. These changes were put into effect on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1970, at which time the Midland, North, South and West Regions disappeared, although their former headquarters at Birmingham, Manchester and

Bristol became Network Production Centres, concentrating on supplying programmes based on their traditional specialisations. It had been the essence of regional broadcasting that it reflected the nature of the region it served, so it was not surprising that in the West Region in the years immediately after the war Frank Gillard had begun a policy of specialising in agriculture, horticulture, country life, country sports, archaeology and natural history.

This led to Desmond Hawkins establishing the Natural History Unit at Bristol in 1957 which, after the regions disappeared, went from strength to strength, so that today Bristol's expertise in the field has become legendary, its output being sold to radio and television networks around the world. Some early examples of their work include *Zoo Quest*, a programme for children introduced by Johnny Morris which, after it was first broadcast on April 13<sup>th</sup> 1962, went on to become a long running series; *The Private Life of the Kingfisher*, produced to celebrate the introduction of colour to BBC2; and *The Natural World* transmitted in 1983. Other acclaimed productions included major series such as David Attenborough's *Life on Earth* and *The Living Planet*, while the *Flight of the Condor* has been seen in more than 50 countries.

In May 1969 the Postmaster General had given both ITV and BBC1 the final go-ahead to duplicate their existing television services on 625 lines and about the same time, with some gentle persuasion from the British Radio Equipment Manufacturers Association, the BBC and ITA also agreed to co-site the three 625 line UHF transmitters that were to serve each area, so that viewers with the new single standard sets would only require one relatively compact aerial, thereby dispensing with the two much larger arrays previously necessary to receive pictures from the old 405 line VHF stations. This new arrangement allowed South Wales and the West Country at last to be provided with completely separate television services as the transmitters designed to serve Bristol, most of Somerset, and parts of South Gloucestershire, West Wiltshire and North Dorset, were to be installed at a new site on Pen Hill, near Wells, upon which the 930 feet high Mendip transmitting mast was to be erected. This was to carry the existing BBC2 network on channel 64, broadcasting of which began on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1969, as well as BBC1 on channel 58, and a new West Country service to be provided by Harlech on channel 61, both to be introduced the following year, after which the Wenvoe station would be used exclusively for transmitting programmes intended for South Wales.

At the same time it was felt necessary to make Harlech appear less Wales-centric and allow easier pronunciation for English announcers, so on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1970 Harlech Television was re-titled HTV, the day on

which their first colour broadcasts began from a new UHF transmitter at Wenvoe. Finally, on May 11<sup>th</sup>, both BBC1 and HTV West, the specially tailored local service, became available from Mendip, completing the separation of Welsh and West Country programmes. Although offering a great improvement for viewers, the arrival of UHF broadcasting in colour added to the already complicated programme options in HTV's sub-region. Here, in addition to the HTV Cymru/Wales service on channels 7 and 41, HTV West was also provided on channel 61 and the 'General Service' on channel 10, the content of which was based on the HTV West output, albeit with provision for separate advertising breaks and a wider ranging news coverage! In the allotted week-day half hour, 'General Service' viewers would see the first fifteen minutes of *Report West*, followed by a commercial break and *Report Wales*, while HTV West's second fifteen minutes was the next half of *Report West*. With the upgrading of the country's transmitter and studio facilities well under way, on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1972, all restrictions on broadcasting hours were lifted and the modern television era began in Britain.

Up until the mid-1960s it had been necessary only to have one local low-powered relay station to fill in a television reception 'black spot', and that was at Bath, but with the reduced and somewhat patchy service area that resulted from employing UHF a number were found to be required in and around Bristol. Since the original need to re-transmit BBC2 from Wenvoe in 1967, these have been constructed on King's Weston Hill, at Ilchester Crescent on Bedminster Down, in the coal-yard of Montpelier Railway Station, as well as on top of Barton House, in Aiken Street, Barton Hill. In addition, further relay stations have also been provided for outlying districts, and these have been sited at Portishead and nearby Redcliff Bay, as well as to the north of the city at Siston, Warmley, and Easter Compton, all of which now receive their input from the main station at Mendip.

The final phase of the BBC's re-organisation of sound broadcasting was the introduction of local radio on a permanent footing, this process beginning with the launch of the eighth such station, BBC Radio Bristol, at 7.55 am on September 4<sup>th</sup> 1970. Not surprisingly, the official opening was carried out by Frank Gillard who, after travelling down from London specially for the occasion, told listeners that: 'Communication is the essential energiser of community life. Up until now in Bristol the local press have had to carry almost the entire burden of it. We have some excellent local papers in our area. This station wants to work alongside them, complementing not competing, and showing that radio too in its direct, inanimate, immediate way has a special contribution to make'. Among the first broadcasters were a young Kate Adie, future television newsreader Michael Buerk, as well as the well-known Bristol actor Tony Robinson.

Another early recruit was local newspaper reporter Roger Bennett who went on to become the country's longest serving Breakfast Show presenter, still starting work at 5 am every morning, even after 25 years!

Although the local stations were designed to replace the old English regional system with its overlarge boundaries that had been dictated by the coverage of the original high-powered medium wave stations, consumer response was well below expectations due to the fact that it had been decided that the new stations should transmit exclusively in the VHF band, and at that time sets to receive such broadcasts were expensive and difficult to tune. However, the seriousness of the situation soon forced the BBC to introduce the simultaneous broadcasting of Radio Bristol on medium wave, this starting on September 4<sup>th</sup> 1972 when the 194 metre wavelength was made available to duplicate the programmes being put out on 95.4 MHz from Mendip. In spite of the fact that the service area of the two kilowatt transmitter at Clevedon proved to be much larger than anticipated, stretching from Sharpness in the north, to Chippenham in the east, Taunton in the south, and Minehead in the south-west, there were some reception 'black spots', so to rectify the situation a replacement with a power of five kilowatts was later erected at Howsmoor Lane, Mangotsfield.

Soon after Radio Bristol's opening, Chris Denham collected a top journalism prize for his speedy and sympathetic coverage of the Axbridge aeroplane disaster, while Peter Davies, the Programme Organiser, received a major outside broadcast award for setting up a Taunton emergency station in 1978 during the crippling snows, the direct result of which was the establishment of a permanent studio in the town. Roger Bennett's recognition as Local Radio Broadcaster of the Year in 1983, and Peter Lawrence's best programme award in the same year were then added to John Turner's commendation for a phone-in on the Moonies, and a top award for the best scripted comedy show against network opposition two years earlier.

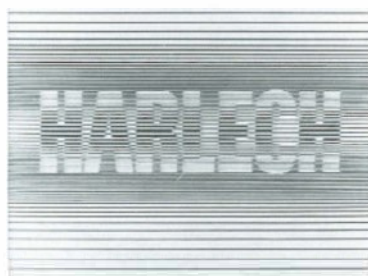
The Broadcasting Act of 1972 opened the way for the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), as the Independent Television Authority had been re-titled, to begin offering franchises to commercial radio stations, the first of these opening in London in 1973. Initially the idea was to complement, rather than compete with, the BBC's own local output so the initial batch of stations were set up in areas where such services were not yet available. This meant that a number of potentially lucrative markets, such as Bristol and Leeds, were not served by independent local radio until the 1980 Broadcasting Act became law and a further batch of 25 franchises were approved, included in which was that for Radio West which was to operate from studios in the Watershed



alongside the old City Docks in Bristol's Canons Road. This took to the air on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1981 to become Britain's 33<sup>rd</sup> ILR station, broadcasting from 6 am until midnight on 96.3 MHz VHF in stereo from a 140 feet high lattice tower erected off Downs Road, Dundry, and on 238 metres (1260 kHz) medium wave using a 1.6 kilowatt transmitter co-sited with the BBC's at Mangotsfield.

Among the early presenters on Radio West were such well-known local personalities as Trevor Fry, who can now be heard on Radio Bristol, and Fred Wedlock, singer and raconteur, who went on to appear in a number of programmes produced by HTV and even had his own series, *Wholly Wedlock*, on Channel 4. However, an economic depression was soon gripping the country and this had the effect of initiating close co-operation between some holders of adjoining radio franchises who were eager to reduce their overheads and costs. Consequently, in 1985 Bristol's Radio West and Swindon's Wiltshire Radio joined forces to become GWR, in what was the first corporate merger in British commercial radio history. The initial affect of this was an extension of broadcasting hours, and after carrying out 24 hour test transmissions between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of September, on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1985 GWR began being used as the official title of Bristol's relaunched ILR station.

In contrast to such difficult to establish licensed operations, from around this time the easy availability of cheap, compact, solid-state VHF FM transmitters brought about a revival of pirate radio, particularly in Britain's larger conurbations, the stations generally serving the specialist tastes of their ethnic communities. Bristol is no exception and a number of illegal stations of varying quality and programme content have come and gone over the years, including Black FM and FTP in the late 1980s and Ragga, Dance, Force and Bonus in the 1990s, while Passion 106.2, on the air continuously since May 1998, is probably best described as the great survivor. Prompted by this movement, in the first official attempt to make radio broadcasting more accessible to ordinary people, during 1986 the Home Office started issuing groups and organisations with low power special event licences, normally granted for a period of just 28 days, and in 1991 these became known as Restricted Service Licences when responsibility for them passed to the newly established Radio Authority. Since they were first permitted a number of RSL stations have operated in Bristol, typical examples being Air Time Radio, a City Council lead initiative based at Sefton Park Youth Centre and aimed at an audience of 11 to 25 year-olds, which was launched on October 9<sup>th</sup> 2000 with the aid of a £50,000 grant from the Millennium Commission, and the Bristol University Radio Station, known as Burst FM, which has been authorised to operate three times since March 1998.



*Television 'idents' all seen in Bristol*

Unfortunately, as the 1980s came to a close, frequencies available for radio broadcasting were getting in short supply, so in 1988 the Home Office ordered a number local stations to end the practice of simultaneous transmitting on VHF and medium wave. Consequently, during in the following two years all the larger independent stations, including GWR, began offering two services where previously there had been only one, and given that the greater bandwidth available on VHF offered the highest quality of sound reproduction, the majority of the mass market stations playing contemporary chart-based music adopted VHF frequencies while the more specialised, such as those playing 'golden oldies', went to the medium wave band. In Bristol, this ensured that on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1988 when the GWR Group launched Brunel Radio (subsequently retitled Brunel Classic Gold, and later Classic Gold 1260) it did so using its medium wave frequency, while GWR FM, concentrating on music produced between the 1980s and the present day, took over the VHF transmitter, both stations continuing to operate out of the Watershed studios until, in early 2001, a move was made to a modern office block in Passage Street, alongside the River Avon. The Swindon based GWR Group is now the UK's leading commercial radio broadcaster owning some 47 local radio stations and a national FM network, in addition to its radio interests in eight foreign countries.

Meanwhile, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1982 Britain's fourth television network had begun broadcasting, but unlike the situation that had occurred at the launch of BBC2, Channel 4 was immediately available to many viewers in and around Bristol from a transmitter operating on UHF channel 54 which was already installed at the Mendip station. By the end of the decade peoples choice of viewing was further increased when, in February 1989, Sky Television began multiple channel direct broadcasting by satellite, while Channel 5, Britain's last terrestrial analogue television network finally went on the air March 30<sup>th</sup> 1997, but not before a vast number of video cassette recorders in people's homes throughout the region had been retuned. Unfortunately many of those who could receive the new service suffered an inferior picture as most of the transmitters operated on relatively low power and no local relay stations were provided. This has proved to be the case in certain parts of Bristol, as locally Channel 5 is put out only from Mendip on UHF channel 37 and with a power of just 126 kilowatts, compared to the 500 employed by its four terrestrial rivals!

Locally, the ever increasing success of the area's two major broadcaster has meant that since the mid-1980s both have both been involved in extensive redevelopment work on their premises. The first to be completed was that carried out by the BBC, and in early 1985 a

large two storey extension was added to Radio Bristol's original premises on the Whiteladies Road site to house the country's first newsroom linked to both local radio and regional television. Not long after new VHF transmitters were brought into service to permit stereo broadcasting by Radio Bristol, and by late May 1989 one of these had been installed at Bristol's Ilchester Crescent relay station, which had also been fitted up to carry BBC Radios 1 to 4 as part of the transfer up to VHF frequencies.

HTV, however, were not to be outdone and the opening of the £3 million extension to their Television Centre at Brislington by Princess Anne on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1986 added a final royal touch to a year of success for the Bristol operation. During the previous twelve months they gained the Queen's Award for Export Achievement, following the sale of such drama blockbusters as *Robin of Sherwood*, *Kidnapped*, *Arch of Triumph* and *Jenny's War*, earned impressive national and international accolades with a long list of regional programmes, and attracted the praise of the IBA. At the time their Chairman, George McWatters, commented: 'Our programme output is such that we have outgrown our original building. We are creating more television than any other company in the ITV system and it was a case of expanding our facilities or cutting back on production. We see our role as essentially a regional one, but Bristol made television is selling world wide and we intend to maintain that impetus'.

The new building incorporated reception areas, executive and boardroom suites, a design and graphics department, twelve film and post production editing suites, an archives library, a new photographic department, producers' offices, improved engineering and technical operations and a two level car park. Work, however continued until the early summer of 1987 to provide an enlarged news studio, new studio control rooms, further editing suites, a dubbing theatre and dressing rooms and wardrobe area, ensuring that today, in addition to HTV itself, associated media companies such as United Productions, Partridge Films, Carlton Sales, Films at 59, and Wingspan Air & Space Channel are also able to be accommodated.

During 1986 the BBC had also begun a further large scale development at the northern end of their Clifton site, although this new section of Broadcasting House, known as 'Phase II' and which was already 20 years late, was not completed until 1989. Its official opening was carried out on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1990 by the Rt. Hon. Chris Patten, Secretary of State for the Environment and M.P. for Bath, who marked the occasion by unveiling 'Network 90', a piece of art by sculptor Caroline White, which still graces the back wall of the main reception

area. As he did so Mr Patten said that: 'Much of the romance of broadcasting lies in places like these new buildings in Whiteladies Road, and not in London. They are an example of the way in which the BBC realises its sense of community through the coverage of regional events on radio and television', while John Prescott Thomas, the BBC's Head of Broadcasting for the South & West added that they now had: 'A fine and fitting broadcasting centre for the 1990s worthy of both the BBC and the City of Bristol.'

The completion of 'Phase II' saw Broadcasting House then cover the whole frontage between Tyndall's Park Road and Belgrave Road, and containing editing facilities for video and film, a new library, staff restaurant and club, offices and a conference centre, was at last fully able to accommodate the demands being made on the site by West Regional Television, Radio Bristol, and the Network Production Centre with its General Production and Natural History Units. While the NHU is quite rightly the jewel in Bristol's crown, the GPU, formed in 1977, has been responsible for bringing to our screens such unforgettable programmes as the *Antiques Road Show*, first broadcast on February 18<sup>th</sup> 1979, and *Casualty* which made its initial appearance on September 6<sup>th</sup> 1986. The Network Production Centre has also over the years made a variety of high quality radio programmes for national distribution, including Brian Miller's production *Florent and the Tuxedo Millions*, which won the 'Prix Italia', the world's most prestigious award for radio drama, and by the mid-1980s its output was running at over 1000 hours a year, taken mainly by Radios 2, 3 and 4.

Just as the 1990s saw a rapid increase in the number of television channels available to local viewers, the same process was also taking place within radio broadcasting and with the BBC's national networks moving progressively over to VHF during the late 1980s, the government was able to free-up two national medium wave frequencies for commercial use, while part of the VHF band was also set aside for a national independent FM network. However, the first to take advantage of the switch to VHF was the BBC itself for, in August 1990, it introduced Radio 5 which initially, and somewhat unsuccessfully, specialised in such things as sports commentary, magazines and schools broadcasts, the new network being provided in the Bristol area by a medium wave transmitter at Clevedon which had been vacated by Radio 2.

In 1991, in order to supervise all the changes about to take place in broadcasting in Britain, the IBA was abolished and in its place two separate organisations were formed, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Radio Authority. As far as commercial radio was concerned, this resulted in the old style approach based on the

principles of television regulation, being replaced by a more relaxed policy. A rapid expansion of the independent sector then took place with the opening of Classic FM, the first national commercial radio station, in September 1992; Virgin 1215 now known as Virgin Radio, in April 1993; and Talk Radio in February 1995, a channel which was subsequently re-packaged in mid-January 2000 as Talk Sport. To serve Bristol and surrounding parts of the West, Classic FM, owned by the GWR Group, is currently broadcast on VHF from Wenvoe, while Talk Sport and Virgin Radio are put out on medium wave from the Washford complex using transmitters which had previously carried BBC Radios 1 and 3.

Additionally, by using frequencies in a different way from the BBC, that is by not insisting on near 100% coverage, independent radio has also been able to introduce seven 'regional' stations which generally cover three large centres of population, the local example being Galaxy 101 which serves the Severn Estuary. This station first went on the air in the late 1980s as the pirate operation FTP (For The People), but was successful in winning one of the new local 'incremental' licences then being introduced by the Home Office to encourage the legal operation of community, ethnic and special interest stations. In its new form it was launched on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1991 using the working title of 97.2 FM, before being christened Galaxy Radio on February 28<sup>th</sup>.

Unfortunately, the 'incremental' stations proved to be a financial disaster due to conflicting artistic, commercial and regulatory requirements and Galaxy, which broadcast only to the Bristol area from studios in Portland Square, was bought up by the Chiltern Radio group about nine months later. It was they who gained the 'regional' licence, and to implement this an additional 101 MHz transmitter with the power of 20 kilowatts became operational at Mendip on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1994, Galaxy 101's licence officially running from September 4<sup>th</sup>. Soon after, Chiltern was taken over by GWR and as the Radio Authority would not permit them to hold multiple licences in the same area, in November the following year Galaxy 101 was sold on to Chrysalis Radio Ltd of London, and is now one of seven stations controlled by that company. It still broadcasts from Mendip, as well as from a replacement 97.2 MHz transmitter brought into service at the communications tower on Purdown, in Bristol, on November 25<sup>th</sup> 1996, delivering a dance and rhythmic hits format aimed primarily at young people from its current studios at Millennium House in Bristol's Baldwin Street.

Finally, to increase the availability of ILR even further, in 1996 Band II frequencies between 105 and 108 MHz were finally cleared for radio broadcasting to allow the establishment of 'community', or very localised stations, such as Bristol's 107.3 The Eagle which went on the air from



the Purdown tower on November 26<sup>th</sup> 1999, its pilot transmissions having been carried out earlier in the year under the name of Kute FM. Established as a partnership between the UKRD Group of Guildford, Surrey, a radio operating company, the Bristol United Press, and other local companies and individuals, the station was provided with a state-of-the-art studio in the *Evening Post* Building in Temple Way which, when installed, was among the most advanced in the world. From there all the songs and commercials are played directly from computer hard-disc memory, with not a CD player or record player in sight, and every day Star 107.3, as the station was re-titled on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2001, puts out a mixture of news, information and entertainment, including classic soul and soft rock music from the last four decades.

The late 1990s also saw a number of ITV franchisees involved in take-overs, and in October 1996 United News & Media bought a 20% stake in HTV, going on to acquire the whole company by the middle of 1997. This, however, was only a temporary arrangement for in July 2000, along with the rest of United's broadcast division, it was passed on to Granada Media which in turn sold HTV to Carlton Communications just three months later! Further developments in local commercial television are also planned, and in December 2000 'community' television came a step nearer when broadcast, video, and film facilities group Vincent VFG bought the licence to operate a station to serve the greater Bristol area. This it achieved through the £1.25 million acquisition of City Television by a specially formed company, Local Broadcasting Group, which plans to launch the service within the next two years, transmitting across Bristol on UHF channel 66 from the mast at Ilchester Crescent.

Although many of the frequencies available for broadcasting were in use as the twentieth century came to a close, an ever discerning public were beginning to expect CD quality sound, less interference, bigger and better pictures, more channels and interactive services. As it was impossible to provide any of these with the existing analogue equipment it was necessary to introduce an entirely new system, and the 1996 Broadcasting Act did much to set the framework for the introduction of digital radio and television broadcasting to Britain in October and November 1998. However, as the impact of the new and exciting technology is only just starting to be felt it is almost impossible to imagine what innovations will be available to viewers and listeners in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, whatever form they might take it would be unfortunate if the best of the practices of public service broadcasting developed during the twentieth century were to be swept aside in a headlong dash towards a proliferation of mediocre networks driven by the dubious requirements of a purely commercial sector.

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**ISSN 1362 7759**